Chapter I:
Myths in the Desert

"Myths are more than just tales forgotten or truth spun into lies."

—Sage Orien'Vaskel

"Did you know that our world was once without magic thousands of years ago?" The old man was draped in ragged winter robes and rested on one of the broken pillars around the well. His voice wove intrigue and wonder into a single thread. The marketplace games of Igalla's children halted; they drew closer, lured by his question. Soft, liquid gray magic seeped from the storyteller's hands, twisting skyward like smoke at his command. It coiled into ancient world, painted from moonlight magic, materialized in the air. Gasps escaped the children as the shifting colors met their faces. Tiny hands covered open mouths. Their dark eyes were wide and unblinking, mirroring the swirling landscapes before them.

"It was a wondrous time when metal came alive, moving, creating, and building. All without magic." The illusion shifted as he spoke. "Great golems and spirits of metal were forced to work for man, dwarf, and elf alike." Churning industrial machines emerged next, belching smoke that covered the land while giant winged steel monsters flew through the sky. "Great wonders of ancient kingdoms, unseen today!" The painting expanded, displaying sprawling kingdoms and cities that stretched toward the horizon. The ethereal light danced across the children's faces, their wide eyes reflecting the swirling, magical lands.

"Then came the Divine Star!" The man bellowed, startling the people within the market, knocking a few of the children to their butt. The colors grew brighter as he threw his hand across the magic. A star streaked across the imaginary sky, its brilliance searing trails across the skyscape. It slammed into the imaginary world in a consuming burst. The children gasped as light shone across the marketplace. Onlookers murmured, covering their eyes as ice-sand around them intensified the effect of the magic.

"Oh no!" One of the little girls cried out as she covered her eyes.

"Watch out!" Screamed another as he dove behind his friends.

A horrid crack echoed from the illusory continents as they shattered and were strewn far and wide in terrible tremors, settling into the familiar contours of the world they knew today: the four Great Lands with the spiraling, impossibly tall World Road in their center. Its peaks pierced the clouds as the raging river "road" roiled within its valleys.

"And thus," the storyteller's voice had become almost mythical, "magic was gifted to the world, though the price was beyond measure. A world broken, but also a world anew. Our world of magic!" The cataclysmic colors of the illusion captured the wonder, sorrow, and danger of his tale. "Darkness soon rose, harbingers of doom fractured the gift and locked away the Star!" Some of the children gasped. "But!" He soothed them. "The Saints waged a great war and defeated the evil, banishing it from our world! They established the Three Noble Realms and taught their people to use their fractured magic.

"But where did the Star come from? Why did it crash?" A younger boy near the front asked.

"Why the Heavens, of course!" The man in robes replied with a booming laugh. "Though no one knows why it came here." Then, with a gentle wave of his hand, the illusion moved. It focused on seven larger islands amid the many within the walls of the World Road, finally coming to rest in the center of the spiraling mountains, which shone with an incredible light.

"Even now, powerful forces work to reach the center of the Road for the secrets within." And it is said," He lowered to a mere whisper, "that at the heart of the World Road, the Divine Star remains, waiting to grant magical wishes to anyone who reaches it." His eyes drifted toward the Imperial banners adorning the nearby walls. Ishia listened to his story from the edge of the market square, leaning against an alley entrance. Her white cloak was pulled tight around her to hide her striking violet hair. The wonder and excitement of the children gathered caused a small smile to touch her lips. But her amusement faded as her gaze met the storyteller's.

His mouth fell slightly open, his eyes widening in recognition. He faltered in starting his next story, stuttering and uncertain of what he saw. Ishia cursed herself silently and quickly slipped into the shadowed back streets behind her. It must have been her eye, its soft glow a careless beacon in the dim light. *I shouldn't have stopped. But he was an excellent storyteller, and I needed to rest for a moment,* she reasoned with herself. Stories and those who told them had always been a weakness of hers. They were a reminder of a world beyond survival, a glimpse of the wonder the Empire stolen from her.

I can't help but listen to a well-spun story; the moonlight had me enchanted. Myths in the Empire were not just idle tales; they were snares. For those like her, tied to their shadowed truths, they promised only ruin. The price she had already paid was seared in her mind and body, a constant ache. And the debt was far from settled. The alleys were a labyrinth of cracked walls and narrow pathways. The muttering figures of thieves and cutthroats haunted its shadows. Ishia moved through them not as prey, but as a deeper shadow, her steps silent and sure on the uneven stones. The air was thick with the stench of poverty, sour ale, and the ever-present but faint traces of magic intermixed with toil. She passed a nearby smith, whose forge had begun to dim.

"Boy! I keep ye' around fer' yer' magic! Get over here and light this damned forged!" He bellowed into the back of the shop. "Don't make me hand ye' over to the Imperials! They always be needin' bodies!"

The mention of the Empire quickened Ishia's heart for a moment. She drew her hood tighter and closed her eye, concealing the features that marked her. To the casual observer, the scars on her face would make her appear blind. But even with her eye shut, she was far from it. Her fingers brushed the sandstone walls as she moved through the town. Ishia centered herself and began to feel the magic around her. Others felt magic like a prickle on the skin, or a hum in the air or a sound they heard. But the Invalar Art of Deltori was something much deeper, to perceive magic with one's spirit.

She plunged into the invisible ocean. Threads of magic from people and in the very air and the land itself brushed against her senses. Flickering flame in the nearby forge, a stream of water ahead, the familiar glow of moonlight in the distance. Her spirit could feel the ebb and flow of each person's magic amid the vast backdrop of the world's own. But then, a cold and unyielding pressure slammed into the subtle currents around her. It was malevolent, sharp as obsidian, and as heavy as a collapsing mountain. A crushing, deep-earth stillness that smothered everything else.

Shit! Her again?! Ishia's eye slipped open, her breath catching as the presence broke her from the embrace of Deltori. Ammula, the shores of Lake Koraii, and now here. Many within the Empire wouldn't risk the winter wyrms that lived within the Wastes, but this huntress was different. The exhaustion from Ishia's flight from Talvalas and the constant pursuit had started to dull her mind and cloud her judgment. *How does she keep finding me?* She glanced around the town as her thoughts raced. *I need to escape. I can't keep running through the mountains.* Igalla was nestled within the Empire-dividing peaks of the Broken Spears. The town's only export was the hardened ice that gathered on the southern faces of their home. She looked toward the wooden platforms and carved stairways that clung to the cliffs above, towering into the clouds. The idea struck her like a spark to tinder.

But a sharp pain flared through her chest. *No! No! Not now!* She staggered against the nearby wall as her hand pressed hard against her chest. Each breath was a battle. Her lungs burned from the ice and sand swirling in the air. The fit wracked her body, but she refused to give in. Ishia squeezed her eye shut and retreated inward to the well of energy that rested deep within her body. She pictured the energy flowing through her veins like sunlight through frost-covered glass, directing the flow of magic to her lungs. The frozen sand of Aleka'Tara had only been a worsening problem for her. Slowly, the pain eased as the magic reinforced her ruined lungs. Each day required more magic. Her time in the Empire was growing shorter.

"You okay miss?" The voice was quiet and kind, clearing the haze of pain. Ishia opened her eye and glanced in the direction of the words. A young boy, no more than ten, stood beside her with eyes full of worry and cheeks flushed from the cold. His clothes were patched and worn, carrying the faint sheen of sand and frost that clung to everything in the winter desert. "You don't look so good." The boy's hands fidgeted nervously together. "You seem to be hurtin' bad o' somethin'."

She stared into his innocent gaze. The reflection of her scarred face and bright white eye mirrored in the boy's stare. A flood of memories threatened to overwhelm her, rising like a tide; Her master's voice, his steady hand on her head, a past now gone. She fought them back and forced a small, reassuring smile. Ishia lightly touched the boy's head and ruffled his hair. The very same thing her master had done to her so many times before. Her voice was a soft, steady murmur. “I'm always okay.” She cleared her throat, drawing on her magic again, letting it thread into her following words. It flowed from within her, a familiar rush of energy spiraling into her throat before streaming to her words as they left her lips. Her voice suddenly carried a subtle and compelling resonance. "***You should leave. Get home to those who need you. It's dangerous out here. I have a feeling a storm is coming.***"

The boy hesitated, his brow furrowed with genuine concern. Ishia felt the subtle pull as her magic took root behind his eyes, smoothing his worry into a placid urgency. He quietly turned and jogged away into the maze of streets. Ishia watched him disappear, her gaze lingering momentarily before turning and continuing towards the mountainside. The town lanes spilled into the upper levels, where steps cut into the sheer cliffs that held the way to the skyships and windcallers hidden in the clouds above. The sea of magic behind her rippled more violently than before. The stonebearer had reached the town's edge. Her aura was easy to sense now. It was like the deep bronze roots of the world. Waves of magic cascaded from the hunter like earthquakes as she made her way closer.

She's… She's begun her hunt. I have to hurry. Ishia shook her head, ignoring her lingering pain and forced herself to focus on the path ahead. A carved stairway jutted from the cliffside. Its icy surfaces glinted faintly in the waning light. It was a treacherous ascent, a challenge even for seasoned workers, but Ishia moved with practiced grace. Her trained footwork carried her swiftly past laborers, hauling a couple of enormous blocks of ice toward the waiting skyships. The cold breeze cut through her cloak. It carried the electrical buzz of magic from the windcallers above. Ishia passed through clouds, higher into the jagged Spears. Her breathing started becoming shallow and sharp, scraping against her damaged lungs as she pressed on. Below her, she could sense the stonebearer near the market well. Her presence had become a crushing weight. *No time at all. Damnit!*

At last, Ishia reached a rare flat expanse carved into the mountain where the Empire's black metal skyships were anchored to be loaded. Only two ships remained docked. Their dark ebony wood decks and black steel hulls gleamed like obsidian against the snowy cliffs. Workers loaded massive slabs of ice onto the closer of the two vessels using their magic over wind, stone, and water. The ship's cargo hold yawned open like a beast's maw, the wind swirling the frost radiating from the ice within. Several guards lounged by the station built into the mountainside. Their armor was dulled by the winter but still bore the unmistakable insignia of the Empire. Ishia ducked behind a nearby stack of crates. Her sharp gaze darted between the workers, the guards, and the waiting ships as a plan began to form in her head.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sharp movement in the huntress's aura below. She was ascending the stairs at a rapid pace. Ishia glanced towards the edge. Now was her chance before the opportunity disappeared. She thought she had at least a week-long lead, but the huntress closed the gap at an alarming speed. Faster than anyone untrained in the Invalar Arts should have been able to. This was no ordinary bounty hunter, but someone meant to hunt people like Ishia.

Ishia steadied herself and drew a deep breath in. Pain flared through her chest, but she pushed it aside. She called to her magic bubbling within her. It surged out, wrapping through her muscles like molten threads of power. Her body responded instantly, muscles coiling and unleashing with explosive force. The world slowed to a crawl as she dashed forward, leaving only the faintest whisper of displaced air in her wake. To the laborers, she was less than a blur in the biting snow, there and gone between heartbeats. Just as the next block of ice was lifted nearby, she leapt gracefully and landed soundlessly atop the loaded icy slabs, and before anyone could notice, she had slipped into the hold.

Inside was even colder than the whipping wind. Frost clung to every surface in fragile lace. Ishia sprang gently to the metal rafters above. Her movements were as silent as they were quick. She clung to the framework and blended into the darkness she had found. The stonebearer was close now. Too close. Her presence had become nearly overwhelming. The sea of energy Ishia could usually sense had darkened to a pitch-black bronze. The taste and smell of crushed minerals, along with the sound of deep silence, emanated from it. *It's so powerful,* Ishia mused in wonder. Her malignant presence had consumed the crew's weak mixture of wind, water, and other elemental affinities.

Ishia steadied her own will against it. Her senses were as sharp, and her mind was as calm as they could be in her exhaustion. *I have no choice. I guess it is time to "let the dice roll" again.* Her master's voice echoed faintly in her mind along with his mantra as she readied herself for whatever happened next. The final block of ice slid into the hold beneath her, grinding to a halt just a span below where she clung. The sound of the scraping slab reverberated through the walls of the airship. A biting cold came from the block. It was such a chill that when her breath hit the ice, it cast a thick fog into her face. The magic in the area dimmed, and voices echoed faintly outside as the workers finished for the day.

"That's the final one. Shipment's ready. Time to finally send these two birds out." The man's voice was tinged with weariness.

"Twelve hauls today, damn fine work, eh?" Another chimed in with pride mingled with fatigue. Then, a new voice cut through the chatter, low and commanding. It reminded Ishia of gravel rumbling together.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. I require a moment of your time." The woman's tone seemed as though she believed she was undeniably important.

"And why is that lady?" One of them called out.

"I'm looking for someone. A young woman. Violet hair. A scarred face and one white eye. Have you seen her?" The woman's speech was deliberate, and her cadence was slow and predatory. "I believe she might be seeking a way out of your… Place… You call home." She made little effort to hide her disgust.

"And I believe this is the only one that doesn't involve walking to one of the smaller villages. Am I right?" The arrogance in her tone dripped like venom.

"May be true," one worker replied gruffly, "but the only thing we've got here is some windcallers, waterartisans, and the occasional others just to make a livin' sellin' ice to the northerners and foreigners." His gloved hand thudded dully against the blocks in the hold below Ishia. "Sorry, lass. No one like the lady you described here. We don't sell passage. That's one of the stops near twenty leagues north."

The huntress sucked in a deep breath through her teeth. Ishia felt her muscles tense instinctively in response. *Don't move. Not yet,* she told herself.

"Hmm…" the huntress mused curiously, "How do you load such large blocks of ice? Wind and water magic? Maybe a little stone magic at times, I would assume?" There was a subtle shift in her tone, from interrogation to intrigue, which unsettled Ishia as much as it did the crew.

"Obviously," another worker muttered, his voice now edged with annoyance.

"And the powering of these skyships?" the huntress pressed. "That is windcaller magic, I assume? These don't appear to be elven-made vessels."

"Aye, who else would it be?" the lead worker replied, now clearly wary. "And why is it your concern? And why should we answer you anyway?"

"I am an Imperial agent," the huntress began, conversationally but still laced with a haunting edge, " and the woman I'm hunting has a great deal of magic. So much that one might say she could rival me. But she's very skilled at hiding it. I am still unsure how she does it, but with all the magic in this area… I needed to ensure there was… A reason for it." Her explanation might have seemed logical to the untrained ear.

"Ain't no woman of magical might here, lassie." A fresh voice broke the tension. This one was deeper and more authoritative than the rest of the workers. Ishia just barely sensed the larger aura accompanying it. Like a roaring bonfire, a fiery orange hue that would be strong compared to many, though still buried by the huntress's own. Ishia sensed a subtle vibration in her pursuer's magic as she turned her attention to the newcomer. It was a shift so faint it might have been imperceptible to many others.

"My crew or I woulda' seen her," he continued, his voice level, "and given the illegal nature o' those with bounties, we'd have turned her in. That, I assure you." He sounded as though he spoke the truth, but a faint undercurrent of defiance was evident in his tone. "You can even check with the Imperials over there. They'll tell you the same thing that I am." The huntress didn't respond immediately.

After a moment, the very air seemed to grow thicker. Ishia's fingers tightened on the rafter's cold frame. She held her breath. Her heartbeat slowed as she invoked her Invalar training to control her body and spirit entirely. Moments passed. Each one seemed to stretch into eternity. The only sound was the faint tapping of ice mixed with wind against the ship's hull.

"Very well," the huntress said at last. "It seems she's disappeared from me. She is a smart one, if I do say so myself. And strong. Very strong, I think. Don't let me stop you. I hope you have a wonderful day in this… Place." Her aura began to recede slowly.

Her pace was much slower than before. The lingering influence of her magic clung to everything around them, almost as if refusing to let go.

"Load em' up! Telor in a little under the week, and then Idresh!" The leader hollered.

"Whew… I wonder who she was hunting… What a scary lady," one of the workers murmured. "I'd hate to be on the wrong side of her. Felt like I was buried alive when she showed up. Like an avalanche from the crags."

"Maybe some sort of manic from the capital," mused another, "You know, one of those condemned criminals. Or a rogue Imperial soldier with stolen military secrets! Or maybe it was…"

"I don't know, mate... Didn't you feel the hate comin' off her? I don't want to meet whoever she's hunting." A third chimed in.

"She felt like someone who would have a bounty, not someone who hunts them down. That violet-haired woman must be dangerous if they sent someone like that." The first worker added.

"Doesn't matter," the newcomer replied grimly. "We want no part of that kind of Imperial business. Bounty hunters like her and those they hunt don't care about collateral damage, 'cause at best the Empire pays you off. But even that don't revive the dead." Heavy with experience and resignation. "Let's get the wind in our wings and off the ground." Ishia sighed at the words. Her thoughts began to slip as sleep threatened her mind. The hold's massive doors slid shut, and the light faded, plunging the space into a cold, silent darkness. The sounds of the crew faded as they moved away. Minutes passed before the ship slowly lurched into motion, swaying and tilting as it gained speed.

Ishia released the tense breath she was holding as the magic that stilled her body began to fade. But a sharp surge of magical pressure slammed into her senses suddenly. The huntress was moving again… No… Flying. The realization hit her just as the ship shuddered violently. The huntress had landed on the deck above with force that rattled the hull.

"Your strange magic just stopped singing! I knew I sensed it!" the huntress cried, triumphant and unhinged. Ishia's heart sank as she realized the critical mistake she had made in her exhaustion; She had used too much magic. She couldn't suppress all of it while it faded, leaving a faint but detectable trail. A path the huntress had eagerly followed. Chaos erupted above as the crew shouted in alarm, their panicked voices rising against the huntress's delighted laughter. Ishia's mind raced. The duel in the sky had been set, the die had been cast, and the odds lay heavily against her.

Chapter II:
A Duel in the Skies

"Above the clouds, there is no law. Only magic, steel, and who falls."
— Captain Varn,
Explorers Guild

Stone magic cascaded from the huntress, tilting the ship with violent force. The air itself warped, compressing with a sudden, crushing weight that drove the breath from Ishia's lungs. She gasped, muscles straining against the suffocating, invisible magic. Each inhale burned. The groaning metal reverberated through her bones as the ship's framework twisted and stretched. Somewhere above her, an earsplitting shriek tore through the wind. The ship began listing even further to one side from the incredible amounts of magic unleashed. *She must want to make sure I don't escape this time. I need to push her…* Her mind clouded for a moment. *Exhaust her before I give out.*

"Where are you?!" the huntress's voice boomed, raw and ragged, shaking Ishia from her thoughts. So primal that it seemed to almost thunder through the trembling ship. Rage poured from her words, undiluted and seething. The hold shivered as the hunter's stone magic flooded around them. The metal screamed in protest again as an entire section of the hull ripped away and blocks of ice spiraled into the dunes below. The deck bucked above her like a wounded beast, and for a moment, Ishia felt her grip falter. The pressure had become almost unbearable.

She strengthened her grip on the rafters, muscles trembling under the strain as her body hung amid the chaos. *Focus. Focus on this moment. Then the next.* A deep inhale, even though painful, centered her. She reignited and empowered the magic she'd funneled into her body, calling it back. The energy coiled taut within her muscles like springs waiting to be unleashed. Her eye darted across the splintering underside of the deck, looking for a weak point. A burst of magic solidified the air near Ishia with rending force. The cry of tearing metal broke the weariness that was haunting her mind. Another nearby section of the hull distorted, buckled, and flew outward as fragments of steel and shattered wood exploded. Gusts of wind screamed through the opening as the hold shuddered more violently. Gravity began pulling them all toward the ground far below. She had run out of time and options. *Time to see how the dice fell.*

With a savage motion, Ishia twisted around and tore through the weakened deck above her. The wood splintered and broke like paper under her magical strength. She flipped through the gap as she rented it and landed lightly on her hands and feet. The quivering deck beneath her threatened to collapse with each passing second. The wind tore at her cloak and hair wildly as she rose. The crew lay scattered about, crushed under the weight of the huntress's suffocating magic. They groaned weakly but could not rise against pressure. They were held to the deck like stones under a raging river. Overhead, rigging had snapped free, the cables thrashing around like serpents. Ishia's eye lifted to the huntress.

She stood at the ship's center, her dark brown eyes blazing with feral intensity. Her face was plain, almost forgettable, a striking difference to the overwhelming power she radiated. Her long auburn braid was tightly bound. It lashed behind her like a whip. The red leather armor that hugged her robust frame gleamed faintly in the cloud-swept light. A black cloak billowed at her back, and Ishia's stomach churned when she glimpsed the Imperial crest etched into the clasp. Then she noticed something the huntress's hood had hidden before: Her ears. The telltale long pointed ears of elven heritage. *An elvess? Here in the Empire? Why would she be an Imperial hunter? Who is she?* The agent rested the head of her warhammer on the ground. The ebony metal seemed to shine with menace as if almost alive. It was pulsing with powerful magic. She smiled as she brought her arm up into the air before her.

Ishia sensed the profound energy within the huntress crack and rumble. It condensed into her outstretched hand before bursting forth. The ship groaned in protest as another wave of sorcery rippled across it. The very air took an ethereal bronze hue as the wave passed. The crushing weight returned, but this time Ishia was ready. Invalar Aeur surged through her, reinforcing muscle and bone with magic until the oppressive force became a pressure to be ignored. The vessel lurched again, beginning to drift toward the other ship.

Across the gulf between the ships, Ishia could sense figures scrambling on the other deck. Then, for one long, agonizing moment, everything seemed to pause. It was as though she and the elvess had crossed to a realm all their own. The wind fell to a mere whisper. The groans and screams of the crew became distant echoes. The moaning of the metal quieted to naught but a low hum beneath her feet. Ishia's gaze met the huntress's again. Something passed between them. Not of words but the clashing of two unrelenting wills. It was something more profound than Ishia could explain, but they both felt the unspoken between them.

The huntress tilted her head slightly as a flicker of amusement appeared. *Move. Now.* Ishia blurred forward in explosive motion. The innervated magic within her body propelled her across the deck with impossible speed. The huntress's eyes widened in surprise. The mask of arrogance she wore shattered as Ishia closed the distance in a heartbeat. Her fist arced toward Auel's face, but just before impact, the air grew viscous. It became like punching through gravel, her momentum stolen by an invisible, rippling barrier of liquid stone. Her hand grew impossibly heavy, her punch nullified by the ward less than a span from her opponent's face. Her lone eye betrayed the briefest flash of shock as the agent sidestepped. The wide arc of the warhammer came faster than Ishia anticipated. She barely managed to block the devastating impact. The bones in her arms reverberated as she was launched backwards, her body limp and uncontrolled.

The cabin wall caught her. The crumpling metal bent even further beneath her weight. Ishia hit the ground on her knees as pain radiated through her back and arms. She pushed herself upright with blood dripping from her lips. She forced herself to ignore the lasting tremors left in her limbs. The ship's deck tilted again as every creak and groan of its buckling frame rang a death knell. Crew members were thrown screaming into the howling void as the magical weight propelled their fall. *I need more power. More speed.*

She called more magic from within herself to soothe the pain. She felt the white tendrils wrap around the damage the huntress had done to her, and the shivering numbness washed away. Ishia readied again. The elvess stood across the deck with a maddening grin carved across her face, her warhammer resting casually on her shoulder. She was comfortable in her chaos.

"I have so many questions for you!" The she called over the roar of the wind with manic delight. "You must have so many secrets! Whatever Valen gave you will be mine!" Ishia's eyes narrowed into a dagger-sharp glare. *How does she know my master? Dammit, she must be a Truthseeker.* The Empire's most fanatical agents, zealots rewarded for their loyalty in hunting secrets and weapons no man, elf, or dwarf should possess. All according to the will of the Empire they serve. Any of their members were dangerous enough in their own right, but with this magic of hers… *T*his seeker was far worse than any Ishia had met before. Ishia could feel it; She wasn't only here for an Imperial bounty or dangerous truths. She was after something else, something personal. *Who is she?* The thought seared into her mind. Ishia's body tensed as instincts took over. She darted forward again, her movements inhumanly fast and fueled by magic. She feinted to the right with her fist aiming straight for the huntress's ribs. She reacted instantly by bringing her warhammer around to intercept. At the last possible moment, Ishia twisted instead. And before she could adapt, Ishia had slipped into her guard and grappled her.

Ishia's arms locked around the huntress's waist like iron bands, her enhanced strength ignited, lifting the agent off her feet. Ishia slammed her into the deck with all her might. But there it was again, the ripple of stone magic and the impact slowing. The throw had been dampened. Ishia let go and sprang backward to her feet as frustration boiled within her. The huntress rose as she brushed the debris off her cloak calmly. Her smug smile never left her face. Her eyes widened in excitement as her rising stone magic began to leak out in streaks and wisps of dark bronze.

The leaking energy began to change, bend, and twist the magic in the air around the elvess. The world around Ishia grew heavier as the huntress's aura rolled over her until it felt as though the ship, no, the very world itself, seemed to be bowing under its weight. The pressure bore down. It was crushing and suffocating her more with every passing second. Her knees bent instinctively. Every muscle strained against the invisible force as she resisted. Finally, Ishia could straighten herself only after she infused even more magic into her body. *A war of attrition. I knew it. She's low.* The powerful aura radiating from the imperial had begun to dim.

"Getting tired, are we?" she taunted, hefting her warhammer and taking a menacing step forward. "Or maybe you're realizing how pointless this fight is. You'll break. Everything breaks eventually." Ishia gritted her teeth and ignored the suffocating weight cracking the air around her. *She wants me to falter, to hesitate.* The huntress's malice was so great that even her magic echoed with its taint. Drawing even deeper into her reserves of magic, Ishia surged forward. The huntress swung her warhammer in another wide arc, but Ishia dodged, ducking low and countering with a furious barrage of strikes. Every strike was faster than the last. It was a flurry of magical strength and lethal intent. But the powerful ward around the elvess held firm. Each punch slowed just before impact, the stone magic distorting the space around the huntress. Ishia's attacks failed to hit their mark. Nullified by the invisible barrier each time.

However, the elvess began to move with increasing caution, dodging when she could. Ishia's frustration exploded, and her strikes became wilder and more desperate. Finally, a single one slipped through. A clean hit that smashed against the agent's face. The sound of cartilage cracking was sharp and satisfying as blood splattered from her nose. She stumbled back, and her bravado faltered for the first time. A snarl twisted her arrogant features with something feral and predatory as she yelped in pain.

"You are strong," she growled, swiping blood from her face, "now I know." Her gaze burned into Ishia as the intensity in her voice grew with every word. "A woman with a scarred face and one eye. Stark white, glowing softly. Violet hair, though…" She cocked her head almost playfully to one side. "It was said to be longer. *The Demon of Talvalas.* That has to be you. Such a vivid description, and your power… Well, it speaks for itself!"

Ishia sneered at the false moniker the Empire had given her. But before she could retort, a rumbling of magic rapidly built within the huntress. She extended both hands, the space between them warping under the strain of the bronze magic. Ishia felt the energy before she could see it. An impossible weight gathered within the pulsing orb between the huntress's palms. It radiated outward in smothering waves as the bronze light shimmered like a dying star. The huntress's voice dropped low and full of terrible triumph. "You just need to be able to speak!" She roared as she hurled the orb forward.

Ishia's instincts screamed. She threw herself sideways with inhuman speed, not caring how or where she landed. Ishia felt the air ripped away as the orb rippled past her. The very magic in the area fractured under the strain of such a powerful technique. Glints of bronze floated around them like magical remains. The orb obliterated the cabin and upper deck behind her. Everything vanished into a storm of dust and debris thrown below. Ishia slid to a halt and began coughing violently. Blood trickled from her lips again. She pressed a trembling hand to her chest and poured more magic into her battered body to stifle the damage done. *I wish I could actually heal,* she groaned to herself.

"Look what you caused," the agent sneered, gesturing to the devastation behind Ishia. "You really are as dangerous as they say." Her laughter rang out amid the chaos that surrounded them. Ishia felt her rage surge hot and blinding. It washed over her exhaustion and pain. Her hands curled into shaking fists. She launched herself forward, her body and mind working in unison, blending magic and might.

The huntress's eyes widened again, but she was too slow to react this time. Ishia's fist connected squarely with her chest. The force of the blow threw the elvess backward; only her warhammer allowed her to stay on her feet. Her boots scraped across the deck as she staggered back, coughing and clutching at her side.

"Two steps… Forward, one… Step back," the agent snarled through the fits. Blood was dripping freely from both her nose and mouth now. "That's not how this… Works." She lifted her warhammer and lunged. The weapon arced downward in a final, overhand strike. Ishia reacted without even thinking. She twisted to the side, bringing her arm up in a parry. She met the hammer's haft from the side and drove the weapon down to smash into the deck, buckling the metal. Even with her magical reinforcement, the glancing clash stunned her arm. A numb sensation spread down from her hand to her shoulder. Ishia grimaced but kept moving despite her injuries, ducking another blow before bouncing back to gain some distance.

Gravity and vibrations. This is far beyond ordinary stone magic. One mistake or moment of hesitation, and she'd be dead. Ishia dashed forward and lashed out with a powerful kick that could dent steel, aimed at the huntress's thigh. The huntress moved the hammer's haft to catch the blow. Her kick slightly bent the weapon's handle, but Ishia's leg vibrated with numbing pain that left it momentarily useless. Ishia staggered forward as her leg failed her.

Her enemy didn't squander the opportunity. She pulled her hammer free and spun in a monstrous swing. Ishia planted herself the best she could and braced for the blow. It slammed into her arms, and she felt several bones in her left arm crack, and one slice through her skin. The shockwave traveled through her entire body. A scream of pain tore from her throat despite her best effort as she stumbled backward from the onslaught. *I need to move. Move or I'll die.* She stumbled backwards before the sensation returned once again to her leg.

Mortal danger forced Ishia's instincts to take over. She ducked low and twisted beneath the following attack. Her movements were precise. They had become a desperate blend of combat and survival. She wove her arms between the elvess's hands to slip into her guard. Ishia twisted with all her strength. She ripped the warhammer from the elvess's grasp, sending it clattering away. The huntress's eyes widened, though Ishia didn't give her a chance to recover. She drove her elbow into the elvess's nose. Cartilage crunched under the brutal impact, and a fresh crimson spray erupted as the huntress reeled away. Her snarl dissolved into another cry of pain.

"You fight and run from the past, from your crimes," the huntress spat as she staggered back. Blood dripped down her face as she sneered. "You can't. The Empire is a hand that reaches all little one. You can…" Ishia didn't let her finish. She launched forward with both fists. Her attack slammed into the huntress's chest, sending her hurtling off the ship's edge. She crashed into the roof of a distant tower, which crumbled into a cloud of debris. Dust, frost, and sand rose from the wreckage, obscuring the remains of the building or huntress.

The warped skyship beneath Ishia groaned its final death throes. The deck heaved sharply, steel bending as the ship's hull buckled. The windcallers below deck must have finally lost all control of the ship. Ishia's eye darted toward the second vessel. Its deck is now rapidly drifting away. *No choice.* Gathering the last reserves of her strength, Ishia sprinted forward and launched herself. The wind howled around her. It grabbed at her cloak as she sailed across the gap. Below her, the collapsing ship spun out of control. The force of her leap broke what remained of its stability. Its remains plummeted into the endless swirling sands. Ishia struck the side of the second vessel with bone-jarring force as the collision tore the breath from her lungs. She scrabbled desperately against the slick wood until she caught the edge of the deck. Pain screamed through her battered body as she pulled herself up. Every movement was agony. She collapsed onto the cold planks.

Her vision was blurring and darkening at the edges. The distant groans of the dying ship faded from her ears as it disappeared into the icy miasma below, the cries of its crew lost to the wind. Her magic disappeared from her battered body. Breathing became a fight for life and death. Ishia let out a shuddering gasp and sank into the cold wooden planks of the deck. As darkness claimed her, one image burned behind her eye: the huntress's smile. It was familiar, like a memory she couldn't grasp. *Where... where have I seen that smile...?*.